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# Review/Television; The Image and Reality Of Hoover and His F.B.I.

By Walter Goodman
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'G-Men," tonight's slice of "The American Experience," at 9 on Channels 13 and 49, investigates the creation of the crime-busting reputation of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and J. Edgar Hoover, its head for nearly half a century. The reputation, which is not the same as the reality, has Mr. Hoover's fingerprints all over it.

This unflattering hour traces the F.B.I.'s ascendance to Hoover's "public-relations genius" for turning the post-World War I Red scares and the explosion of crime during Prohibition to personal and institutional aggrandizement. The fact that the pudgy career bureaucrat looked nothing like the model agent portrayed in the material he planted in comic books, as the photographs here attest, makes his celebrity the more remarkable.

Tonight's case study in hype brings back the newsreels and bits of old movies that starred the heroic G-man. (There's James Cagney out-toughing bad Barton MacLane.) It tells of scores of magazine articles (many of them signed by Hoover but written by an industrious pro named Courtney Ryley Cooper) that idealized the F.B.I. and its director. In the narrator's words, "Mythology replaced history."

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Observers of Hoover's career, including reporters, historians and former agents, agree that he ran a tight, even uptight, agency. He is allowed credit for building the F.B.I. into a professional operation, but at the price of thoroughgoing conformity. The scenes of assembled agents in the 1930's looks like a convention of department store trainees. One former G-man says, "I didn't wear a blue shirt till after Hoover died."

Image was the thing, and Hoover guarded his jealously. The account of the career of Melvin Purvis, who was in charge of the office in Chicago when John Dillinger was killed there, is revealing. Purvis's son tells how "the man who got Dillinger" was considered a rival by his boss and was pushed out of the F.B.I.

Hoover found enemies everywhere. He permitted men he considered friends access to F.B.I. files; others were barred. (In the interest of full disclosure, I confess that I made the Hoover enemies list in the 1950's. It did not take much, just a mildly critical magazine article, but with the help of the Freedom of Information Act, I later discovered that Hoover had scrawled instructions to his press office to "Give Goodman nothing.")

Much more seriously, Hoover reportedly let it be known to members of Congress and other officials that his files contained material about their private activities, a tactic that is generally credited with keeping up appropriations for the F.B.I. Walter Trohan, who covered the bureau for The Chicago Tribune, says, "Mr. Hoover was not above polite blackmailing." Tonight's program does not reach the period of F.B.I. surveillance of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and others in the civil rights and peace movements, about the same time that "The F.B.I.," a popular and adulatory series that bore the agency's seal of approval, hit the tube.

Toward the end of this sometimes heavy-handed yet cautionary hour, Hoover is seen attacking the "scoundrels who would destroy Americanism" in a speech to Boy Scouts at the 1939 World's Fair. If there is a lesson here, it is to beware of public figures who come bearing an Americanism shaped to their own narrow specifications. The American Experience G-Men: The Rise of J. Edgar Hoover Produced, directed and written by Irv Drasnin; Janis Ruden, associate producer; Peter Odabashian, editor; Dena Katzen and Sheila Moloney, assistant editors; principal photography by Tom Spain; additional photography by Richard Lerner, Ned Johnston and Kurt Zell; Margaret Drain, senior producer; Judy Crichton, executive producer. At 9 tonight on Channels 13 and 49.

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